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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to try to determine older adults' motivations for and experiences in the educational system as well as to try to determine how their life histories were being woven into their educational experiences. Based on the work of state theorists such as Buhler and Erikson as well as on the life review concept of Robert Butler, the study focused on a group of older people (60-80) who were taking some form of adult education course. The researcher visited them in their homes on three occasions, each one week apart, and spent one and one-half hours on each visit tape-recording their thoughts. The interviews were somewhat structured. The first focused on the adults' motivations for pursuing education; the second was concerned with the actual experience of classroom learning; and the last interview focused on the integration of the educational experience into the world of the learners. However, the interviewer let the subjects "ramble on" in hopes of evoking life review types of thoughts. The study found that many motivations exist for older learners to take adult education courses, such as social class, thwarted educational dreams, or a wish to go to college. The classroom experiences of the older adults were diverse; many were nostalgic; most were positive. The interviewer found that the life review process functioned as a counterpoint to classroom involvement as a means of restoring pride and self image when the adult education experience was not a good one. The life review also was used by the older people to remember specific scenes so as to cope with difficult times as a source of data for solving life problems. At the same time, many of the participants seemed to be on the verge of taking new directions as they reminisced about the past. Thus, the life review process was used to integrate education into their lives and to move on from the experience. (KC)

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THE OLDER LEARNER:

EDUCATION AS A MEANS TO ONE'S PAST

by

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Presented to The 1983 National Adult Education Conference of The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 2, 1983.

I'd like to begin with a quote from Bertha, a participant in a pilot study I conducted several years ago. She was, at 68, attending an Elderhostel at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst where I was doing graduate work and she had the kindness and grace to share with me her thinking about her own aging at a time when I was floundering about with questionnaires trying to tap (or trap) "feelings" about aging.

She said:

> I'll tell you: as you get older your time perspective changes completely. Time seems to escalate. Time seems to go so much faster. And when you look back the difference between being 20 and 80 is so small the whole lifespan is reduced to nothing, you know?
>
> So that an 80-year-old man can begin to feel like a kid. It's the funniest thing: you look back--it just goes, it just flies through your fingers.
>
> I have letters that I wrote when I was 20 and I can read them now and touch the same me--through all those years. And I can experience myself then and now.

Bertha was in an educational program at that time because she wanted to further experience herself--perhaps her personal historical self. That, however, I never found out because, as a new researcher, I didn't have the patience and persistence to allow her to make connections between her sense of her own history and her educational experience.

But it was the beginning of a quest for me to try to connect aging and learning, learning and aging. What sorts of information could I find about older learners' motivations for and experience of adult education if I were to focus on the

interactions of their own personal histories and their learning situations? And since meeting Bertha I have been looking at the ways life review and the experience of adult education might came together, how they might interweave in the lives of older people who are on the one hand making sense of their lives and simultaneously participating in formal or informal learning experiences. I have been exploring how the past, the present, and the future come together in the worlds of older learners.

Theoretical Framework

Before going further, I would like to discuss the theoretical framework of my research. The underpinnings come from the work of stage theorists: Bühler, Erikson, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga, Maas and Kuypers, Neugarten and Vaillant.

Else Frenkel-Brunswik's (1936, in Neugarten, 1968) work explored the lives of 400 adults using, among other sources, detailed self-reporting interviews. She attempted to trace the "inner aging" of her subjects through the later years of their lives, looking at the "external events"--the "dimensions of behavior"--and at the "internal reactions to these events." She wrote: "It is important to know what the individual thinks about his own life."

Her task theory is germane to the framework of this research--the determination that each age is challenged by a developmental task which must be completed so that the individual can move on. Here is how she puts it:

> The ability to transpose oneself, to take on another attitude toward life is a character trait which is almost a necessity for success in life. For the psychology of development it is important that the individual both in personal and in practical fields not only satisfies his needs but that he also at the same time accepts certainties and tasks, and works for them.
>
> . . . . .
>
> In the first half of life, our subjective experience is determined primarily by our needs, in the sense of the expansion of the individual. On the contrary, in the second half of life, the individual regards as more important certain tasks which he has set for himself, or which have been set for him by society, or which have come from some code of values such as religion or science.
>
> . . . . .
>
> This last period contains experiences of a retrospective nature and considerations about the future, that is, about oncoming death and one's past life. The balance-sheet of life is drawn up.[1] (1968, pp. 82 & 84)

Hence, in the last stage of life the past and present merge in a new, evaluative way.

Erik Erikson's (1963) epigenetic model of the developmental process posits such age-related tasks as coming in stages which are cyclical and predictable. Periods of crisis, stagnation and growth alternate and occur in sequential patterns. Having completed the task of each stage the individual is then able to enjoy the particular beauty and security of that psychosocial level. The last stage--"ego integrity vs. despair"--concerns the older adult's acceptance of his or her life; it is the ripening of the fruit of the seven stages of the lifespan (Erikson, p. 269).

Older adults are then to be seen as wishing to integrate their own life histories within the communities they have known.

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[1] Italics are my own.

They are making personal declarations and their own personal histories are on review. Here is how Erikson describes the older adult who has achieved the final stage:

> The possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and economic threats, for he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one cycle of history, and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes. (1963, p. 269)

Finally, I wish to include Robert Butler's (1963) theory that life review is a "universal and normative" process in older adults, the means to "settling accounts" as Frenkel-Brunswik would put it.

Briefly, Butler (1963, 1982) suggests that life review occurs as individuals confront their own mortality. He translates Michael Balint's (1957) "Torschlusspanick" as, literally, "the panic at the closing of the gate." Others who have since explored the role of life review suggest that it is an on-going process throughout the lifespan--perhaps in response to particular crises or life-changes (Hately, 1982; Lowenthal, Thurnher, Chirboboga, 1977; Myerhoff 1982). Here is how Butler describes life review in older people:

> The life review is characterized by a progressive return to consciousness of past experience, in particular the resurgence of unresolved conflicts which can now be surveyed and integrated. The old are not only taking stock of themselves as they review their lives; they are trying to think and feel through what they will do with the time that is left and with whatever material and emotional legacies they may have to give to others. (1982, p. 25)

The Quest

Back to Bertha. She was attending an Elderhostel which, as you know, involves staying in a dormitory on a college campus. She told me that she and others had stayed up late into the night discussing themselves; and I thought how similar her experience was to my own as a freshman in college. We were both away from home, living among peers, and engaged in highly reflective moments in which we would be stimulated by others' ideas, memories and insights. What a ripe setting for life review!

In my subsequent study, however, I came to focus on a group of older people (60-80) who were within the age-range for Butler's paradigm of life review, who were taking some form of adult education course but who lived at home. I visited them on three separate occasions, each one week apart, and spent one and a half hours on each visit tape recording their thoughts. I hoped to stimulate their life reviews through the interviewer-interviewee interaction. The interviews were somewhat structured--I say "somewhat" because I did have an agenda for each interview session but I learned early on to allow what appeared to be random and elliptical reminiscence to occur when the participants seemed to go off into other realms. These included past scenes, ruminations of heroism, haunting moments that had the clarity and exactness of a pointilist painting. They were rich, spontaneous ores of life review and I managed to halt my insistent need for more linear closure and I let the participants wander through passages illuminated by their reflected youths. Often they would return to a particular scene to refine it for me

the next week.

The methodology of the study was grounded in a phenomenological model based on the work of Alfred Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, and Robert Coles. Some anthropological fieldwork experience also contributed. Pushing for what Berger and Luckmann (1967) call "subjective consciousness," I organized the interviews as follows: the first focused on the background (personal and educational) of the participants--primarily their motivation for pursuing education. It consisted of questions such as "Why are you here? How did you come to participate in adult learning at this time?" The second was concerned with a discussion of the actual experience of the classroom learning and the participants' assessment of it. I asked: "What is it like for you to take this course (or these courses)?"

The last and final interview focused on the integration of the educational experience into the world of the learners--into the "big picture" of their lives. I asked: "What does this experience mean to you? How do you make sense of it?" Because the first interview had focused on early personal lives, the participants became reminiscent; they then talked in terms of their past histories throughout the remaining sessions. You see that I wanted to tap the older learners' motivation, experience and their own sense of meaning--but within a framework of reminiscence and, hypothetically, life review.

The Results

All sorts of motivations exist for older learners to

take adult education courses. I heard themes of social class, thwarted educational dreams, sex roles, historical pressures, and family intrigues. Remember, this cohort finished high school (and many did not finish due to economic circumstances) at a time when there were no scholarships, few public institutions, fewer women attending college and, hopes were being dashed by the Depression. Life review--one's ongoing examination of the past--brought back memories of early dreams. One woman remembered her love of English in seventh grade. Now, at 74, she has started taking a poetry-writing workshop.

Another man--a Polish refugee who was interned at Buchenwald and Dachau--is now studying history and psychology. He is working for a bachelor's degree, a long-held dream. He said: "I want to put together the bits and pieces to make a picture of my life."

One woman, Carlotta, is training to be a literacy tutor with adolescents. She said:

> This is rewarding to me because I've been looking back through the years and comparing the time when I was coming up with the time now that these girls are having . . .
>
> Because I compare it a lot with what's happening to the girls today as what happened to me. And I always regard, (well, my mother died but I had this old maid aunt who really I regarded as my mother even when my mother lived. Because, as I said, my mother was a midwife and she was always gone: three o'clock, four o'clock at night, all the next day. She didn't have too much rearing to do with me. And my aunt was my mother's older sister, who reared her. She was really who I looked toward as my mother.) And, really, what she instilled in me was, "Ignorance mistakes for keeps."

The classroom experiences of the older adults were, of course, diverse. Many were simply nostalgic. One woman kept

repeating the same Italian classes so that she could remember her childhood home. A 79-year-old man reminisced in music class. He said:

> If you hear a piece of music--it might be a popular piece of music or it might be serious music--your thoughts wander back to the time you heard it before. Maybe back fifty years. It might put you in the mood that you perhaps were in at that time . . .

One woman, Sophie, began going to college in her 50's and is pursuing a master's degree in her 60's. Her life review held bitter recollections: she had wanted to go on to school but her parents had objected. She had been raised by immigrants who, Sophie said, believed that "going to college was looking beyond our status and wasn't even acceptable as an idea." She married and led the life her parents approved of but, after many years decided to go to school. Now, at 66, she reflected on the family pressures that had limited her life. She said:

> I was the queer one in the family who was always interested in reading and interested in education . . . Of course it was a time of the Depression; there was a need for money to be brought home, but, it was more . . . my parents' attitude. (They came from Ireland, the north of Ireland. They grew up with the class consciousness: You stayed within your class, did not attempt to move out of it because that route led to unhappiness. And you didn't belong anywhere but in that particular niche) . . . I wanted to go to college, to be a gym teacher. There was no money to go, but they offered me money to be a hairdresser.

What she determined to do, finally, in late life, was to move on. Robert Butler acknowledges that this is a feature of the life review process. He says:

> The old are not only taking stock of themselves as they review their lives; they are trying to think and feel through what they will do with the time that is left and with whatever material and emotional legacies they may have to give to others. (1982, p. 25)

Sophie, at 66, wants to teach. Her goals are not limited by her age. She said of herself and her life review:

> It's not only the unhappy--perhaps disturbing--experiences in our lives which lead us to look back . . . then maybe disturbing experiences have led us to develop some potential capacities we've had all along that we would not have developed had we become happy (or, if not happy, contented).
>
> If I had been contented completely, I probably wouldn't have gone to school, would I? What was that going to do for me or allow me to develop or sustain personally what I still needed?

She acknowledged that going to school now affords her a means of forgiving her parents for their narrowing vision of her life when she was 15.

Madeline left school in 1924 to go to work. She said:

> Of course we were the Depression people and when the Depression hit there was no hope. That lasted for 10 years. And by that time I had thrown in the sponge in hoping to get into school again and I just got married and life went on (very happily) but back in my mind, you know, my life was never what it should have been.

She says now:

> Well, to put it in one sentence: Going to school made an entirely different person out of me. (I think that you waste your time if it doesn't change you.) But it changed me completely.
>
> I hate to think of the person I was before, in a way. Because maybe I was unhappy without an education. With one the world is just a different place and it's wonderful. Everything is wonderful. I feel as though I can handle my problems so much more sanely.
>
> The inner satisfaction . . . In a way you are never alone again once you get educated, seems to me. Because you live up in your mind, you know. And somehow you know where to go or what to do.

Here is how she describes her experience. I hope that you can hear the echoes of past, present and future in this

74-year-old woman's description of a poem she developed and presented to her Adult Education class:

> It was a beautiful spring. I felt about 25 years old. It was lovely. So I walked down to the store which was maybe a mile away. Beautiful. The leaves were coming out and I passed a teenage girl that looked so sad I could have cried for her. And I wondered what in the world made her sad. I thought, "What if she had just gone to the doctor and found out she was pregnant and she isn't married?" (You know, there was so much of this going on.) And I remembered my own unhappy youth. I thought, I felt so sorry for her because I'd never been one who wished I was back in that young age group at all. I would never go back before 40, really. It's true. Fifty is even better.
>
> And so I went home and I wrote a poem about it and I worked on it for a little bit and I liked it.
>
> And on the way there was a pizza parlor and I saw something: The man was in the window flipping his pizza. And I said something about the flipping pizza man which just went with spring, you know, and about the little girl and then across the street there was a little boy coming home from nursery school carrying his rug. (They take their little naps on the little rug they carry.)
>
> And then there's one other thing I forgot--all this was part of the springtime and here was this sad little girl and very attractive, walking with her head down. So I wrote a poem about it and I typed it up and gave everybody a copy of it.
>
> Everyone took one home. And I think, apparently, I didn't put the feeling across that I meant to. They thought it was all right but they weren't very enthusiastic about it.
>
> . . . . .
>
> But going to school made an entirely different person out of me. . . It changed me completely. I hate to think of the person I was before, in a way. Because, maybe I was unhappy without an education. Everything is wonderful.

Finally, I'd like to look at how life review functioned as a counterpoint to classroom involvement, as a means of restoring pride and self-image when the adult education experience was not a good one. I'd like to present the case of Paolo.

Paolo was a 69-year-old retired laborer of Cape Verdian

descent and he wanted terribly to get a high school equivalency certificate (the GED, General Education Diploma). I never quite understood why he had to have one; he called it "just an empty piece of paper." Yet, he claimed to have graduated once from high school and because of a fire, no record could be found of his high school graduation. At this point he hoped to take a small engine repair course offered at a local community college but they simply wouldn't let him in without that "piece of paper."

Paolo's adult education experience is a striking example of wasted effort and tedium. He was first placed in an ABE (Adult Basic Education) room to learn to read. Yet, when I asked him to read from a manual he seemed to read quite well. Nonetheless, Paolo attended ABE classes for a while--and they were appropriately enough or metaphorically, in the basement of the learning center. Paolo said:

> They don't ever see sunshine and seems like they cut down on heat there. (Why, you got your coat on and you're freezing and the classrooms they had upstairs--that was too warm.)

Perhaps because Paolo's early school experiences had taught him that teachers know what's best for you, or perhaps because at age 68 he doubted his own ability to judge scholastic levels, Paolo did not object to placement in the ABE program at first. And he stayed there for some months learning "to read" by using elementary school materials or phonetic workbooks prepared especially for illiterate adults. New methods using the life of the learner and based on pedagogy of Paolo Freire (1968, 1970) were never tried. The following exchange describes Paolo's experience:

Interviewer: Did you every do any autobiographical talking?

Paolo: No. Talking?

Interviewer: About your life?

Paolo: No, no, we don't. We never had that there. I don't think they had that much time for that.

Interviewer: Do they ever do any reading and then you talk about the stories?

Paolo: Well, yes, you do read; tell about the story. Like a story we were reading about Jack and Brown: What Mr. Brown did, who was at fault, why did the dog run away and all that.

Interviewer: Nothing about your life?

Paolo: Oh, no! Our life was not never involved there. I mean, we didn't exist.

Interviewer: Only Jack and his dog.

Paolo: Only Jack and the dog and Mr. Brown. . . . [Laughs] That's what I'm saying. They give me them books to read. You know what I told her? I said, "You know _____, you're a lovely teacher. I like you. But this stuff I had so many years ago. When I read this story about this dog, this dog running away and the mule and all that," I said, "that was a long time ago and that was when I was in the fourth grade."

I said, "I don't like the method. You should--a person should go where they left off and start studying from there. Whatever they remember, you start from there and work up, not go from where they're trying to forget."

This is only the first stage of Paolo's experience. I will spare you the rest because it actually went downhill from there. You need only know that Paolo was moved, finally, to another class (in the too warm upstairs) where he simply did not get very far. He worked on dittoes and impersonal texts, was shuffled about when new students showed up and, basically, struggled along in a most unsympathetic system.

In the middle of relating his experience of adult education, however, Paolo would break into spontaneous and lengthy

reminiscences. These reminiscences were focused on his early life as a young man, as a Merchant Marine. So striking was the contrast between Paolo's failure to gain the GED and his heroic exploits as a Merchant Marine, that it was clear that Paolo was using his historical self as a coping means.

Here is a sample of Paolo's reminiscence:

> I got on a tanker, then there was no union. They were hiring right off the dock. We were only getting 25 dollars a month then. I went as a mess boy . . .
>
> It was the sea. I use to like to travel from one port of the country to another. The dearest part about it is if you're off watch and you're up on deck when the ship is just coming in, you can see just the outline of the land you're going to, the country you're going to. And it's a ship that's approaching closer; it gets bigger and then you start seeing figures. The people look like ants. And then, as it gets closer and closer, then you start seeing the whole vision of the whole person. And the things you see after you get there in the strange land. How the peoples' culture is. I use to get out and go . . . I use to go off by myself and I use to get on with the people. Just enough to listen to their language and to see if I understand any of it, you know, to talk.
>
> We went to the Amazon. The ship I was on use to go to the Amazon River. Along the Amazon they have a factory where they make redwood for furnitures, for houses--shingles and things like that. And they also have rubber and they have alligator skins. And all the experience of seeing those things and watching those Indians--naked Indians, riding the wave after the ship has gone by. The ship leaves off of a wave. And they ride that wave on a piece of board. And I'm telling you, I ain't seen so many people come out of one little bitty hut. I mean a hut that is made out of straw or some stuff anyways. And you see one, two, three and I had counted over 15 people coming out of that one little bitty hut. I wondered how in the thunder they all fit in there. Unless the hut is big inside.
>
> Yeah. And then they all got their own, you know just like you see in the movies, a little hut here, a little hut there. And when the wave of the ship, you know, that wave use to come all the way inland and wash down their huts. There was an awful lot of pressure about that. Wash down their huts. So they got so they got after the ships, not to get too close

> to land because a lot of that water will go in and knock down their huts, see. But I think they built a wall to prevent that, in the Amazon. The Amazon is a long river; it goes for miles and miles.
>
> I remember the good times. I don't have no regrets, to tell you the truth. I really enjoyed my life, every bit of it.

One underlying theme of life review is that it can act as a means of justification of one's life: justification to oneself, to others, and perhaps to the interviewer (what Lowenthal, 1975, calls "the dominant other"). Another theme is the separation that may occur--separation from the here and now of everyday life--which enables one to play back more grandiose notes from the past (Butler, 1967, 1977; Weisman, 1967). In a study of 150 veterans of the Spanish American War who were treated at an outpatient clinic in Boston, McMahon and Rhudick (1967) found a high correlation between mental health and reminiscence of events of the remote past when these men were heroes.

Clearly, Paolo's experience of life review and education is a shocking distortion of what we, as educators, would set out to create. I present it as an example of how subconscious needs, life review, and education are interwoven in varied ways.

Thorgud's experience of life review and education demonstrates another variation of the above theme. This 79-year-old participant appeared to demonstrate McMahon and Rhudick's (1967) theory that older people may select specific scenes for review so as to cope with difficult times. These memories may be used as Lieberman and Falk (1971) put it: "as a source of data for solving life problems." Thorgud, age 79, had recently

experienced a break-in in his home. This is a very threatening experience for the elderly and Thorgud's wish was obviously to find a way to understand what was happening in his changing neighborhood. He took a sociology course and, while describing the content of a recent lecture to me, broke into the following reminiscence:

> I was manager of a store in Brooklyn. This was during the Depression. They took me into the back room--a couple of clerks and myself. Now this was way back before they had supermarkets. They only had service stores in those days. So one gunman took us in the back room and held us there while the other one cleaned out the drawers. And I remember he asked me if I had any money in my pocket and I said, "Yes." He said, "Is it your own money?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Then keep it." So he didn't take it. If it was the company's money he would have taken it.

And:

> I remember one A & P store was held up down there. And they wanted the manager to open the safe--they had a safe, you know, with a combination on it. Well, he was nervous, I suppose, and couldn't get the combination right. And he had his hand up on the safe. It was one of these safes on the floor; he had one hand up on the safe while he was fooling around with the combination. And one of the hold-up men got so annoyed that he took a cleaver and cut his fingers off . . . I do remember that it did happen that people got hurt.

Other individuals seemed to repress their own recollections and concentrated on the courses as though keeping busy with adult education were a means of forgetting the past. One man was involved in five or six highly quantitative courses--electricity, computers, piano. He claimed never to be reminiscent. A woman attended Psychology for Everyday Life and concentrated on correcting the instructor's pronunciation rather than allowing the course content to touch her fragile defense system. Not all memories glow; recollections of one's childhood can be

filled with bitter and angry scenes. Although Erikson and Butler would have us process these unhappy moments so as to forgive our parents, accept our mistakes and integrate our lives, we are not all capable of doing this just because the age and stage is anon.

(Yet, I too wonder whether Isadore, the man who hustles in and out of courses nonstop is engaged in an effort to test himself now against his younger self; and whether Lillian, the woman who waits after class to give the psychology instructor her corrections, isn't also working her way through some examination of past conflict and personal history.)

Finally, I would like to say that life review is there--some older adults will work it into their educational experiences in more obvious ways than others. It is there if only because "education" has a lifelong historical symbolism for many old people. A long view of motivation and experience incorporates gestalts of what education means, especially to people who did not continue in school beyond high school. Long forgotten personal themes often came to light as participants discussed their personal experiences. Often the older people seemed surprised to hear themselves recall stories of early life and youthful dreams gone astray; none had forgotten their early school years; many were reworking scenes from the past.

Yet, all the participants saw themselves as engaged in something new: something of the here and now, something exciting. Life review did not restrict any participant in their sense of continuation and experience of the present. A large

number of individuals appeared to be on the threshold of new directions even as they reminisced about the past. Bertha's words echoed for me throughout: for, even as she stood on the brink of a new adventure, she reflected:

> When you look back the difference between being 20 and 80 is so small the whole lifespan is reduced . . . so that an 80-year-old man can begin to feel like a kid.

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